



Central
District
Conference

A conference of
Mennonite Church USA

Reporter

KNOWING
CHRIST'S LOVE
– ANSWERING
GOD'S CALL

July 2010

CDC annual meeting at Bluffton University

Discussing our differences



Ervin Stutzman, Executive Director of MC USA, was one of three worship leaders at the 2010 annual meeting.

Over-arching worship themes of Christ the center (growing in unity), Christ the connector (growing as covenant people) and Christ the sender (growing in mission), connected the growing in differences discussion.

Focusing on the theme of “Following Christ and Growing Together,” delegates of Central District Conference met at Bluffton University, Bluffton, Ohio, June 24-26 and, in a variety of settings, worshipped together and conducted the business of the conference.

A thread running throughout the conference wove together ways to remain in relationship and talk about our differences.

It was CDC’s 54th annual meeting. One hundred twenty three delegates, representing 35 of CDC’s 46 member congregations participated. Delegates “met” Joseph Stuckey, pioneer leader of what is today CDC. Mick Sommers, Silverwood, Goshen, Ind., portrayed Stuckey in a monologue originally written by Rich Bucher, North

Danvers, Danvers, Ill.

In the state of the conference address, Karl Shelly, Assembly, Goshen, Ind., CDC president, stated that the story of Joseph Stuckey is an important part of CDC’s history. It reveals the roots of CDC and why we use the metaphor of adult siblings for how congregations relate to one another.

In speaking of the state of the conference, Shelly reminded delegates that the mission of the church is to be in tune with the spirit of God:

“The primary place of movement is the congregation, but we can meet beyond the congregation for inspiration and support.

“Our movement together as a conference is not without hurdles, one of which is financial health that needs the help of all those connected to the conference.”

Shelly shared that the Leadership Council, with every member participating, pledged a total of \$5,000 in the effort to address financial needs.

Given the shortfall in congregation giving needed to cover conference expenses, additional donations from individuals will be necessary.

Another hurdle of the conference is finding unity in an age of disconnection.

“It is a mistake to blame too much on geography. There seems to be something about the ethos of our time, busyness and individualism,” said Shelly. “Finding unity means dealing with conflict and differences.”

“We want to create a healthy and safe place to dialogue. Those

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Mick Sommers portrayed Joseph Stuckey.



Carolyn Schrock-Shenk shared tools and guidelines to help talk about differences.

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who take following Jesus seriously often have strong opinions that may lead to labeling. Our polity by itself will not keep us from hurting one another. We need to take dialoguing together seriously, whether that be about immigration, atonement, being a people of peace, or relating to gays and lesbians.”

In a dialogue between Shelly and Robert Martz (Topeka), delegates were reminded that even though individuals and congregations may be moving in different directions there is hope for us.

“It all depends on whether we can remember all the things we hold in common,” said Shelly. “We need opportunities to let our differences and perspectives be heard, where we can listen to and hear one another. It is not going to be easy, but the Spirit has a way of bringing us together. We need each other in our differences.”

During a plenary session led by Carolyn Schrock-Shenk (Assembly), those attending had opportunities to focus on tools and guidelines that help us talk authentically about differences while maintaining respect and relationship.

In a workshop titled “Sharing Out of Our Differences,” four congregations, Eighth Street, Salem, First Mennonite Urbana and Topeka, shared how each is working at addressing the homosexual issue in their respective congregations. Delegates also had opportunity to share around tables and to share during open mic time.

Addressing differences within the early church from Paul’s perspective became the focus of three worship services. Preaching were Ervin Stutzman, MC USA Executive Director, Harrisonburg, Va., and CDC members, Louise Wideman, Bluffton, and Rachel Miller Jacobs, Goshen, Ind.

Three “times with children” during the worship services enabled youth and adults to ponder ways to deal with differences. Deborah Nisly, Grace, Pandora, led time with children with the help of puppets.

Formal action

In formal action, delegates received Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship of Berne, Ind., into membership with CDC. A 2010-11 \$199,256.00 spending plan was adopted as was a slate of officers.

The local mission emphasis of

the annual meeting was Brazo en Brazo (Arm in Arm), a ministry of Lima Mennonite, First, Bluffton, Grace, Pandora, St. John, Pandora. In a volunteer offering, delegates contributed \$455 to that program.

Sharing stories

Three CDC congregations shared their stories during the meetings. Those were Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship, Atlanta, Ga., Silverwood, Goshen, Ind., and Southside Fellowship, Goshen Ind.

Delegates heard of the congregational transition of Pleasant Oaks, Middlebury, Ind., as it joined First Mennonite, Middlebury, in the past year.

The Board of Directors also granted church plant status to Mennonite Fellowship of Asheville, Asheville, N.C. The emerging congregation requested the status for tax purposes while the group continues their discernment process.

Worship

Over-arching worship themes of Christ the center (growing in

**Louise Wideman
preached on
Thursday evening.**



unity), Christ the connector (growing as covenant people) and Christ the sender (growing in mission), connected the growing in differences discussions.

Louise Wideman

Louise Wideman, First, Bluffton, Ohio, associate pastor, reminded delegates of the importance of keeping Jesus Christ as the center of focus.

“We must make intentional efforts to keep our faith grounded in God,” she said.

Then, using the imagery of wheels, she said that as life is full of decisions and challenges, “whatever the situation, we need to be focused on the center.” She then broke into song, singing *Jesus be the Center*.

Adding that there is a growing hunger in our culture for a more satisfied inner life, she shared about labyrinths used in several Christian traditions.

“These circular paths provide three steps for its users,” she said,

explaining them as release (letting go of all thoughts) receiving (finding a place of meditation and prayer) and returning (re-entering life).

Wideman asked worshippers, “What will God offer us as we listen in the center of the labyrinth?” Providing her own expression of hope for CDC, she said she hopes it continues to grow with Christ in its center.

Jesus and Peter dialogue

A skit performed during Friday’s worship, summed up the purpose of the annual meeting’s theme. In it, Gene Caskey and Gary Wetherill of First, Bluffton, performed a Jesus and Peter dialogue titled “Many Parts, One Body,” written by Rachel Miller Jacobs and inspired by 1 Corinthians 12.

At its conclusion Peter tells Jesus, “So what this means is that we need each other. We’re lucky to have each other precisely because we’re not all the same.

Together we are more than we are apart.”

To that, Jesus responds: “Peter, I think you’ve just invented the church.”

Peter: (modestly) “Oh, no, Jesus, we did that together.”

Jesus: “That’s true. Isn’t it great that we have each other?”

Peter: “It sure is.”

Ervin Stutzman

Ervin Stutzman provided worshippers with a setting of Paul, prisoner of the Lord, in jail as he continued to preach in Jerusalem. Quoting Galatians 5, Stutzman said that Paul was passionate that God’s love folded Jews and Gentiles into one body.

Paul, through a vigorous stretching, came to realize that growth occurs through the love of God. “When we are children, our love is small and self-centered. It’s only when we grow up in Christian love that our heart expands,” he said. Stutzman used himself as

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Rachel Miller Jacobs preached on Saturday morning.

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an example of how God stretches people's hearts. He said that God called him into preaching, then to become a conference moderator, and now a denominational leader.

Going further, Stutzman said that God calls us to grow in love to embrace those we don't know.

Using the upcoming MC USA conference planned for Phoenix, Arizona, Stutzman, shared one thing that MC USA needs to resolve, using God's love as a guide. The concern is how the church reacts to the new Arizona immigration law. Does the church go ahead with its meeting in Arizona, or does it move to another state?

Wondering how we maintain the unity of the Holy Spirit, Stutzman said, "In my position I hear many things [about what to do concerning Phoenix]."

Practicing Ephesians 4 model, MC USA leadership plans a leaders forum of conference and agency leaders to discuss the decision to meet in Phoenix. Prior to the leaders forum a church delegation will

visit Phoenix. It will report what it hears throughout the larger church. Participants in the forum will ask for God's guidance in making a decision on whether to hold its assembly in Phoenix.

Stutzman concluded his sermon by quoting CDC's Vision of Healing and Hope proclaimed on a banner behind him: "God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ, and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world."

Following the Friday worship service, delegates were invited to a question and answer period to get acquainted with Stutzman, who began as Executive Director of MC USA on Jan. 1, 2010.

Rachel Miller Jacobs

In her sermon Rachel Miller Jacobs, of Faith Mennonite, Goshen, explained that the 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 text of the Saturday morning service assures Christians that nothing gets in the way of reconciliation with God, even though our sins still exist. "The text says that the human point of view is 'out' and that

we have been upgraded in Christ," she said, adding that this is a transformation from the human to the divine point of view.

Reconciling is the defining act of God," said Miller Jacobs. "And through this defining act we have a new job description. We become ambassadors for Christ." She said that although this is nothing new, it is very hard to practice.

"To be ambassadors of reconciliation we need:

- to be willing to start where the other person is,
- to listen as if the other person has something to teach us,
- to be quick to note our failures,
- to practice thinking out of a new operating system where you don't have to be wrong in order for me to be right,
- to be helpers and lovers,
- to take time outs."

Miller Jacobs underscored that we need to be willing to work together despite our differences. "Our job is to be in conversation with each other," she said, concluding, "Let us pray to move outside of our comfort zone and pray for our willingness to speak the Spirit's word."



TOP – Anita Rediger of Emmaus Road Fellowship, Berne, Ind., addresses the delegates.
CENTER - Delegates consider action in Marbeck Center.

BOTTOM LEFT – Nancy Kauffmann, representing MC USA and Peace and Justice Support Network, presents peace mugs to Suzanne Lind (representing herself and her husband, Tim); and Marlene Suter (representing her husband, Fred) recognizing their efforts in working for peace.

BOTTOM RIGHT – Deborah Nisly, Grace, Pandora, Ohio, offers a puppet ministry to youth during workshop services.



Listening Committee report

Central District Conference annual meeting, June 24-26, 2010

Listening Committee: Gerald Mast, Tim Schrag, Suzanne Stauffer

We are a conference tending to relationships

- We learned about the missional buzz in each congregation and listened to stories about how God is working in specific congregations.
- We heard of the work of God in the broader church, in Mennonite Church USA agencies and institutions.
- We worked in table groups that encouraged personal relationships.
- We are like a wheel that has Jesus as the center, with different spokes for different folks.
- But some of us wonder about the health of the rim that holds the spokes in place, wonder about accountability.
- We are good at planning awesome family reunions with fantastic fellowship.
- But some wonder about the seeming absence of direction and purpose beyond planning great family reunions annually.
- There were tender times of prayer and naming those who are ill.
- There were many moments of humor and laughter.
- We are a conference tending to relationships.

We are a conference facing challenges with honest and care

- Although the budget seems under control, it has required sacrifice from our staff and will present challenges for the foreseeable future.
- We struggle to maintain unity amidst inter-congregational disconnection, amidst busyness and individualism.
- We are a conference stretching itself in growth, seeking to love what God loves—to love ALL that God loves.
- We seek to understand how to face conflict in the spirit of Jesus Christ.
- We are encouraged to accept conflict as normal.
- We heard from Joseph Stuckey: “I did not agree with him, but I thought that he was still my brother.”
- We were challenged to be passionately committed to our convictions and also passionately committed to relationships with people who are passionately committed to different convictions.
- We are a conference facing challenges with honesty and care.

We are a conference full of gratitude and hope

- We thanked God for the different voices giving expression to God’s spirit among us.
- We sang: Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow, My Soul is Filled with Joy, Holy Spirit Come with Power, Jesus Be the Center, In Christ there is no East and West.
- We remembered with gratitude leaders from the past: Joseph Stuckey, J. Lawrence Burkholder, John Burke, Jr., Dale Schertz.
- We are grateful and hopeful for the new leadership of Mennonite Church USA, for newly appointed executive director Ervin Stutzman’s presence with us this weekend.
- We are grateful for the young people who are present with us.
- We are thankful for the new Central District congregation in Berne, Indiana.
- A member of our committee characterized the spirit of this meeting as one of relative stability, calm, and lowered anxiety.
- We are a conference full of gratitude and hope.

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